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Practices and perceptions of living apart together

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This paper examines how people living apart together (LATs) maintain their relationships, and describes how they view this living arrangement. It draws on a 2011 survey on LAT in Britain, supplemented by qualitative interviewing. Most LATs in Britain live close to their partners, and have frequent contact with them. At the same time most see LAT in terms of a monogamous, committed couple, where marriage remains a strong normative reference point, and see living apart as not much different from co-residence in terms of risk, emotional security or closeness. Many see themselves living together in the future. However, LAT does appear to make difference to patterns of care between partners. In addition, LATs report advantages in terms of autonomy and flexibility. The paper concludes that LAT allows individuals some freedom to manoeuvre in balancing the demands of life circumstances and personal needs with those of an intimate relationship, but that practices of LAT do not, in general, represent a radical departure from the norms of contemporary coupledom, except for that which expects couples to cohabit.

Keywords: living apart together; couples; intimate relationships; family practices; Britain

Recent surveys suggest that people living apart together (LATs) account for around 10% of the adult population in much of Western Europe, North America and Australasia, although precise estimates vary according to the question asked and the survey group (Duncan, Carter, Phillips, Roseneil, & Birkbeck, 2013; Liefbroer, Seltzer, & Poortman, 2012; Régnier-Loilier, Beaujouan, & Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2009, Reimondos, Evans, & Gray, 2011, Strohm, Seltzer, Cochran, & Mays, 2009). British data suggest that up to a quarter of supposedly 'single' adults who are not cohabiting with a partner (either married or unmarried) in fact have a partner living elsewhere.[1]

To date, sociological interest has mainly focussed on the question of why people live apart together. Some researchers see LAT as a new way of doing intimacy in contemporary societies, where marriage and cohabitation are increasingly decentred. Others, alternatively, see LAT as simply another stage on the well-established route to cohabitation and marriage. This would be little more than a continuation, even a renaming, of conventional relationship practices like boy/girlfriend 'courtship', or enforced spousal separation (see Duncan et al., 2013 for review of this debate). If anything, LAT would then reinforce the central normative position of marriage and cohabitation. Typically, in following up this question, empirical researchers have attempted to delineate how far and to what extent LAT is a response to external constraints or circumstances (like housing problems or job location), how far LAT is just because partners feel it is too early to live together or, alternatively, how far LATs actually prefer to live apart together – perhaps because they value independence and autonomy (recent examples include Duncan & Phillips, 2010; Duncan et al., 2013; Liefbroer et al., 2012; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009; Roseneil, 2006). There has been less attention paid to the more everyday issue of how LATs practice and manage their relationships, and how they view them. Are LATs simply 'conventional' couples who happen to live apart, or does LAT mean a different sort of relationship? Answering these questions also provides another way of approaching the sociological question identified above about whether, or not, LAT marks a radical departure in doing intimacy. This is the issue we take up in this paper.

Methods

Sample

We draw on a national survey of people in LAT relationships in Britain (England, Wales and Scotland) in 2011, supplemented by 50 semi-structured qualitative interviews carried out in the same year. The survey combined data from specially commissioned 'LAT modules' (a set of identical questions on LAT) carried out as part of three

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statistically representative general population surveys (the NatCen Social Research Omnibus, the British Social Attitudes Survey and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Omnibus). All three constituent surveys used face-to-face interviews and were based on random probability sample designs. The interview sample took the national survey of people living apart as a sampling frame, from which respondents were purposively selected according to their reasons for living apart as given in the survey in order to have a spread of reasons and a range of ages that paralleled the distribution identified in the survey.

Defining LAT and survey

The question that defined individuals as 'LAT', asked in all three surveys of those not currently married, cohabiting or in a (same-sex) civil partnership, was:

> Are you currently in a relationship with someone you are **not living with** here?[2]

This question – with respondents themselves defining the word 'relationship' – was designed to be wide enough in scope to include all types of LAT; the survey therefore included LATs of all ages, and with diverse reasons for living apart. This defining question yielded a total of 572 LATs – 9% of the 5869 respondents across the three surveys.[3] These LAT respondents were then asked an identical set of questions about their relationship history and plans, their relationship practices and understandings, and attitudes towards LAT.[4] Standard socio-demographic information for LAT respondents was also collected on each of the three surveys.[5] These data were then combined into a single LAT survey data set. Full survey results and interview transcripts are available from the UK Data Archive, and an open access data source book is also freely available (Phillips, Duncan, Roseneil, Carter, & Stoilova, 2013).

Interviews

The 50 semi-structured interviews sought to access experiences, practices, meanings and understandings about LAT in more depth. These took around an hour, and were conversational in discussing a given schedule of topics without rigid preset questions.[6] The interview sample approximately matched the survey in terms of age, occupational group, sexuality and ethnicity (some categories were over- or under-represented, see Appendix). This has the advantage of creating a qualitative interview sample, which – while not statistically representative – reflects the range and diversity of LAT in Britain.

Analysis

The national survey data was analysed using SPSS, including standard frequency distributions and cross-tabulations. Chi-square tests were used to assess the significance of variations in the data. The 50 semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using NVivo.

Results and discussion

Daily life: distance, contact and time together

How do people carry out the daily life of relationships when partners live separately? A crucial finding is that most LATs live near one another, many very near. Around two-thirds live within 10 miles (16 km) of each other and one-fifth – 18% – lived within a mile (1.6 km). Only small proportions had partners who lived a considerable distance away, with 17% of partners living over 50 miles (80 km) away, including 8% with partners living outside the UK (see Table 1). This range was reflected in the qualitative interviews where, although some partners lived abroad or at opposite ends of Britain, more commonly they lived in the same town or neighbourhood, even in the same street or block of flats.

This has considerable implications for how LATs can conduct their relationships. Much attention has been paid to the issue of long-distance relationships (Holmes, 2004; Reuschke, 2010; earlier referred to as 'commuting marriage' (e.g. Gerstel & Gross, 1984)). However, these account for only a small proportion of LAT relationships in Britain, where the majority experience is that partners live nearby. Geographical and cost constraints on physical co-presence for most LAT partners, therefore, will be low. If they wish, or have the time, most LAT partners can easily see each other daily or at least several times a week.

This possibility of frequent contact is indeed reflected in the actual patterns of contact; as many as 68% of respondents saw each other several times a week, 21% every day and only 16% saw their partner less than once a week. Unsurprisingly, frequency of personal contact declined with the distance the partner lived from the respondent. Thus, 90% of the small proportion of LATs who lived outside the UK saw their partner less than once a week, as did 68% of those who lived more than 50 miles

Table 1. Distance partner lives from respondent, Britain 2011.

	Total %
Up to 1 mile	18
Over 1, up to 5 miles	29
Over 5, up to 10 miles	17
Over 10, up to 50 miles	19
Over 50 miles (inside the UK)	9
Outside the UK	8

Source: National LAT survey 2011.
Notes: Unless otherwise specified, tables exclude the small number of 'don't know' and 'unclassified' responses. Percentages refer to the weighted sample.

(80 km) apart.[7] Conversely, 44% of those who lived within 1 mile saw their partners at least once every day. Similar patterns have been observed in Australia and France (Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009; Reimondos et al., 2011).

In so far as there *were* constraints of geographical distance, or of uncoordinated daily rhythms, these were alleviated through frequent telephone and electronic contact. As many as 86% contacted each other by phone, text, email or the internet at least once a day – 55% several times a day. Only 1% contacted each other once a week or less. This high level of contact was fairly constant by distance they lived apart. Even 90% of those living within 1 mile (1.6 km) of their partner contacted each other in these ways at least once every day, but so did 85% of those living more than 50 miles (80 km) apart in the UK and 72% of those with partners abroad. Indicatively, the more intimate verbal exchange enabled by telephoning or Skype was the most popular form of contact, followed by text messaging. Unsurprisingly, older respondents were more likely to phone, and younger LATs to use text, email and social media.

Given that most LATs lived nearby, and were in frequent contact when apart, then why live apart at all? About a third of the sample of LATs wanted to live together but were constrained from doing so by external circumstances – often because of financial issues to do with housing, or less frequently due to job or educational locations. Approximately another third thought it was too early in the relationship, or they were 'not ready', to cohabit. Put together, these latent (constraint) and potential (too early/ not ready) cohabitants accounted for around two-thirds of the survey sample. The remaining third 'preferred' to live apart for various reasons, although often this preference was not so much a personal preference but because of felt obligations to family (especially children) or because of fears about living with a partner given past bad experiences. However, almost half the sample (49%) gave several reasons for living apart, and sometimes these secondary reasons apparently contradicted the primary reason (both 'preference' and 'constraint' for example). There is, therefore, some ambivalence and overlap between categories (see Duncan et al., 2013 for detail).

Perhaps surprisingly, there is little association between reasons given for living apart and either gender or occupational class. Indeed, we found no significant gender differentiation in any of the survey variables used in this paper to describe the practices and perceptions of LAT (see Duncan, in press). Similarly, there are few significant differences by occupational status. In contrast, there is often (but not always) significant covariation in the survey variables by age. Accordingly, the large majority of the 'too early/not ready' and 'constraint' categories (as defined by main/only reasons) are bunched into the youngest age bands below 35 years old and, for both categories, a little over half are below 25. In contrast, the 'preference' category is spread more evenly across age bands and are more likely to have cohabited previously and to have children. Nonetheless each category is represented in all age bands. Thus, around one-fourth of respondents in the 'too early/not ready' and 'constraint' categories were over 35, while a significant proportion of the 'preference' category is young (33% under 35). Also surprisingly, there was little significant difference in reason for living apart by distance, except that the small proportion of partners living abroad was more likely to do so for job reasons.

Given the proximity in which most LATs live to their partners, it is not surprising that most LATs said that they find little problem in making arrangements about meeting up, or for sharing joint finance. Just 11% say making arrangements to share costs for joint activities is 'very' or 'fairly difficult', although twice as many – 24% – say the same about arranging time to spend together. This difference is not surprising, as the effects of geographical distance will be most felt for meeting up. Indeed, difficulty in arranging time together is closely related to the distance partners live apart. As many as 46% of those living over 50 miles (80 km) apart in the UK, and 69% of those with partners living abroad, find making arrangements for meeting up 'very' or 'fairly difficult'. Conversely, only 18% of those living less than 1 mile (1.6 km) apart find meeting up difficult, with 73% finding this 'very' or 'fairly easy'.

Having some physical distance in a relationship does have advantages, however. Thus nearly all interview respondents saw at least some benefit in living apart because of the greater personal autonomy, space and freedom it afforded. Lisa, [8] one of the qualitative interviewees, is a good example. Her partner was in a restricted penal hostel subsequent to a prison term, and on his release Lisa planned cohabitation, house-hunting, marriage and (more) children. For her, LAT was an enforced and temporary separation from conventional living arrangements. Nonetheless, even Lisa found advantages in living apart from her partner. As she put it:

> ..if there is a benefit [from living apart] it's still that you've still got your own space, you know I still can get up in the morning and walk around with my make-up half way down my face

and furthermore she was able to '…see my friends or my family or do whatever I want'.

Many women interviewees described the advantages of increased personal autonomy in relation to their male partners. However, as with Lisa, this autonomy was often more of a circumstantial, if pleasant, by-product of being apart, with living together remaining their stated ideal.

Indeed, women interviewees sometimes described how they carried out the cooking, cleaning and washing for their male partners as traditionally performed by wives. Nonetheless, some interviewees consciously used the autonomy and geographical distance of LAT to more safely manage their emotional and practical lives when cohabitation seemed risky. Others felt LAT allowed them to better prioritise commitments to children or elderly parents. In these ways living apart could make a relationship possible that would be threatened by too much close contact.

Michelle offers an example of how LAT meets felt needs for both frequent and close contacts, on the one hand, and autonomy and emotional safety, on the other. Michelle feared living with any partner, following painful experiences with two earlier cohabiting partners involving financial ruin, emotional distress and physical abuse. Despite having 'a good relationship' – and a son – with her current partner, she was determined to live apart. However, her partner lived '3 minutes away', and:

> generally comes round here every day. Except for when I say, 'No, I'm going out'. He'll usually stay 'round one or two nights a week anyway.

In addition, Michelle and her partner 'ring each other twenty odd times a day' – which meant 'getting on each other's nerves sometimes'.

Overall the geographical constraints of LAT do not seem to create serious problems in most respondents' current LAT relationships, at least as far as contact and practical arrangements are concerned. Those LATs who live furthest apart are most likely to find difficulties, but even in these cases the majority do not experience too much trouble in contacting each other and arranging joint activities. While not at same levels of personal contact we can assume for cohabitation, most LATs have frequent contact with their partner; the majority are neither 'long-distance relationships' in a geographical sense, nor 'part-time relationships' in a temporal sense. On the other hand geographical distance, and the time apart that it offers, can be useful and indeed welcomed, allowing flexibility and autonomy as part of the relationship. In the next section we ask how far this finding extends to how LAT partners themselves see their relationship.

LAT as coupledom

Do LATs see themselves as part of a couple, and do they hold the same expectations about sexual exclusivity as cohabiting and married couples? Is LAT just a short-term expedient? Is living apart perceived as a different way of life, with distinctive advantages or disadvantages?

The large majority of survey respondents thought of themselves as 'a couple' (79% always or usually did), and felt other people saw them this way too (84%).[9] Very few (7%) said they rarely or never see themselves as a couple. There was no significant variation in this identification either by age or by length of relationship, suggesting that couple identification is not a proxy for a long-term relationship or for the respondent's life stage. This widespread couple identification is, however, related to the type of LAT (see Table 2). As we might expect, 'constraint' LATs are most likely to think of themselves as a couple (87% always or usually did so), as they want to live together but are separated by unfavourable external factors, while 'preference' LATs (who say they have chosen to live apart) are least likely to do so, although still a clear majority – 68% – always or usually thought of themselves as a couple. Similarly, we might have expected more ambivalence for the 'too early/not ready' category (those at an early stage in the relationship, although not necessarily shorter in terms of time). However, even 79% of this category always or usually saw themselves as a couple; this suggests, as we discuss below, that many in this category are not simply new / 'dating' boy/girlfriends.

Table 2. Couple identification by reason for living apart.

Whether think of themselves as a couple	Too early %	Constraint %	Preference %	All %
Always	50	78	39	57
Usually	29	9	29	22
Sometimes	13	10	20	13
Rarely/never	8	3	12	7

Source: National LAT survey 2011.

Linked to this predominant identification as a couple, nearly all respondents felt that sexual exclusivity in LAT relationships was important – 87% thought it would be 'always wrong' or 'mostly wrong' if a person who did not live with their partner had sex with someone else. This was little different from views about exclusivity in co-residential married and cohabiting relationships (89% said the same[10]). The 50 interviewees were all adamant on this point – and many stated that transgression would mean the end of the relationship. In Britain, and it appears elsewhere, the norm of relationship sexual exclusivity has, if anything, strengthened over time (Figes, 2013; Scott, 1998); indeed British Social Attitudes surveys show there was an increase between 1984 and 2011 of those saying that extramarital sex was 'always or mostly wrong'. This is in some contrast to the considerable liberalisation reported for other aspects of personal sexuality, with much greater acceptance of premarital sex and same-sex relationships, or indeed LAT (Duncan & Phillips, 2008). Actual practice, of course, does deviate from expressed and expected norms. Even so, the 2010 NatSal survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles among 16–74-year olds in

Britain found that just 3.3% of married respondents, and 7.1% of cohabitants, had sex with more than one partner in the last year (private communication from NatSal team, see also Mercer et al., 2013). One of the 50 qualitative interviewees (who was married but gladly separated from her husband) reported overlapping sexual partners; she viewed occasional sex with her LAT spouse as a sort of continuing obligation.

The qualitative interviews discussed ideas and feelings about commitment and coupledom in depth. (This material is reported in detail in Carter, Duncan, Phillips, & Stoilova, in press). Nearly all participants felt that their relationships were just as committed as a co-residential relationship, although this was less the case – as we might expect – for the 'too early' interviewees.[11] Most also reported high levels of intimacy, and many felt ready to cohabit – although they had not yet done so or even preferred not to (ibid). While 6 of the 50 qualitative interviewees said that they were not in love with their partner, only 2 interviewees, both men, said they were uncommitted. Both saw their relationships as fine for the time being, but not something set or constant. Indeed, both said that they would not mind if their partners left them and found someone else who could give them more commitment. They were happy with their relationships for the time being but neither saw them as especially long term or future oriented, and their relationships were contingent on current happiness and satisfaction. But these are exceptions – the other 48 interviewees saw their relationships in terms of a constant in their lives and generally a long-term commitment, whatever their plans for cohabitation or alternatively continuing to live apart. Overall the survey and the interview data suggest that the idea of monogamous and committed coupledom is usually just as strong for most LATs as assumed for co-residential couples, and most like to see their relationship in this way – even those particularly valuing autonomy, early in their relationship, or worried about cohabitation.

How far does co-residential marriage remain the normative ideal for relationships, and do LAT couples share this view? Earlier research using a 2006 survey on the general public's attitudes to family in Britain (Duncan & Phillips, 2008) concluded that while marriage was no longer seen as necessary for sexual relationships, being a couple or even having children, nonetheless it retained an ideal 'gold standard' status. For one of the constituent surveys (the British Social Attitudes Survey) we asked the full sample of the general public (LAT and non-LAT) what type of relationship they would regard as ideal 'at this time of your life'. The majority – 60% – of all respondents chose marriage/civil partnership (and living with their spouse/partner) and a further 12% chose unmarried cohabitation. Despite that, 8% said that they would prefer to be 'in a relationship and not living together' (i.e. LAT) – close to the proportion of LATs in the sample overall (9%).[12]

We might expect a close match between the respondent's current relationship status and her/his answer to this question about their ideal relationship. However, the strong normative position – the 'gold standard' – of marriage stands out, as does some ambiguity about less-established relationship forms. So while 96% of married respondents chose 'married' as their ideal, just 67% of cohabiting respondents chose cohabitation. This contrast was even more marked for LAT; only 56% of LATs actually chose 'LAT' as their ideal. Furthermore, while 13% of single people and 11% of the separated/divorced chose LAT as ideal, less than 1% of married or cohabiting respondents did so. Indeed 20% of actual LATs would ideally like to be married and living with their potential spouse, and another 12% in unmarried cohabitation. This presumably reflects the fact that many either are constrained from living together or see LAT as an early stage.

Matching this ambiguity about LAT as an ideal, around half of LATs in our 2011 survey thought they would indeed be living with their partner in the next two years (a quarter 'very' likely and a further 24% 'fairly likely'). A similar proportion said this was 'fairly unlikely' or 'very unlikely' and 5% were unsure. See Table 3. It was the 'constraint' respondents who were most likely to think of LAT as a stage in this way; 62% thought it 'very' or 'fairly likely' that they would live together in the next 2 years. Indeed, the qualitative interviews showed that 'constraint LATs' often had definite plans and timetables for the near future in overcoming financial or housing obstacles to living together. The 'preference' category had the greatest proportion who said they were fairly or very unlikely to move in with their partner (62%), and in the qualitative sample many 'preference' interviewees discussed LAT more as a constant state rather than a temporary stage (Duncan et al., 2013). Nonetheless, 35% of 'preference' LATs thought it likely they would move together within 2 years' time – even though they ostensibly prefer to live apart. Similarly, while we might expect the 'too early' respondents to think of living together within 2 years, in fact just 49% of the 'too early' category thought this likely. Almost as many (42%) thought

Table 3. Perceived likelihood of living with partner in the next 2 years, by reason for LAT, Britain 2011.

Likelihood of living with partner in next 2 years	Too early %	Constraint %	Preference %	Total %
Very likely	15	40	17	25
Fairly likely	34	22	18	24
Fairly unlikely	28	25	36	29
Very unlikely	14	13	26	17
Don't know	9	1	3	5

Source: National LAT survey, 2011.

Table 4. How respondents describe their partner by age.

Description of partner	Age 16–24 %	25–34 %	35–44 %	45–54 %	55 + %	Total %
Girlfriend/ boyfriend	86	64	44	36	20	62
Partner	8	18	34	53	38	22
Other half	5	6	8	2	5	7
Husband/wife	0	6	6	5	18	5
Other/no term	1	6	8	4	19	4

Source: National LAT survey 2011.

moving in together in this time unlikely, and hence they do not appear to be straightforwardly on an early stage 'courtship' or boy/girlfriend path to cohabitation.

These patterns co-vary with age; younger LATs – who are more likely to be in the too early category – are significantly less likely to think they will move together in 2 years. This presumably reflects a large number of 'dating' boy/girlfriends in this group. Indeed, when we asked people how they referred to their partner, the appellation 'girl/boyfriend' was most popular in this group, while the term 'partner' was most used by older preference respondents. Indeed, a noticeable minority of older LATs referred to their partner as 'husband' or 'wife' when they were not actually married.[13] (Although, possibly because of the lack of any particular term for LAT partner in English, 'boy/girlfriend' was the majority usage.) See Table 4.

For around half of survey respondents, as Table 3 shows, LAT was seen as a stage on the way to cohabitation. A similar proportion saw living together as their ideal. Table 3 also suggests that there is no simple matching between reason for living apart and expectations about cohabitation. In practice, somewhat less than half the respondents (41%) had already lived apart together for more than 2 years, as Table 5 shows. Length of relationship is sometimes used as a proxy for the nature of a LAT relationship (e.g. Haskey, 2005); the assumption is that shorter relationships indicate living apart as a transitional stage (either for boy/girlfriends on the way to cohabitation, or more established couples constrained from living together because of external factors). Longer relationships are taken to indicate a preference for more permanent living apart. By and large Table 5 supports this assumption. Thus 72% of the 'too early' category were in a relationship of less than 2 years, while 74% of the 'preference' category were in relationships of 2 years or over. 'Constraint' respondents were more evenly spread, as we might expect when factors external to the relationship prevent cohabitation, rather than the nature of the relationship itself. However, significant minorities appear counter-intuitive; for example, 14% of the 'too early' category had been in their relationship for 3 years or more, and 26% of 'preference' LATs had been together less than a year. Similar results were found for France and Australia (Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009; Reimondos et al., 2011). This suggests, like Table 3 on perceived likelihood of living together, that not all 'too early' LATs are conventional 'dating' boy/girlfriends, and that 'preference' LATs are not necessarily older people in long-term relationships.

Given this apparent ambiguity about LAT as an ideal or long-term state for many, how far do people who live apart together rate this as a positive or a negative relationship form? As Table 6 suggests, respondents were more likely to have positive attitudes (positive figures shown in bold) about LAT relationships than negative ones. Emotional assessments of LAT were more positive, in particular a majority of 66% disagreed that living apart 'puts our relationship at greater risk of breaking down' (only 13% agreed). Assessments about LAT enabling practical autonomy – about following career, being with

Table 5. Length of relationship by LAT category, Britain 2011.

Length of Relationship	Too early %	Constraint %	Preference %	Total %
Less than 6 months	39	10	12	19
1 year (incl. 6 + months)	33	23	14	24
2 years	14	16	20	17
3–5 years	12	26	24	22
6+ years	2	25	30	19

Source: National LAT survey 2011.

Table 6. Attitudes towards living apart together, Britain 2011.

Living apart from my partner…	Agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree %
…puts our relationship at greater risk of breaking down	13	20	**66**
…means I feel more emotionally safe and secure	**19**	38	42
…gives me more freedom to develop my career	**39**	29	31
…gives me more freedom to be with my friends and family	**50**	27	23
…limits the extent to which we can have a close relationship	29	24	**46**
…gives me greater financial independence	**47**	28	25
…makes me feel less secure when I think about the future	19	26	**54**

Source: national LAT survey, 2011.
Note: Positive views shown in bold.

friends and family or allowing financial independence – were less clear-cut, although still positive.

Apparently contradicting these positive assessments of LAT, more respondents (42%) disagreed that LAT made them 'feel more emotionally safe and secure' than agreed (19%). This might suggest that living apart affects emotional security; however, given other responses it is possible that respondents assessed LAT as not much different ('more' in the question) from living together. Indeed 38% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

It is apparent that there are fairly mixed views for most of the statements, with many respondents choosing the middle option (neither agree nor disagree) and, for many questions, small majorities. Similarly, the extreme answers (agree strongly and disagree strongly) were usually chosen by fewer than 10% of respondents (given the small numbers usually involved, these extreme categories are not shown in Table 6). The exception is the first question asking whether 'living apart puts our relationship at greater risk of breaking down'. Here, 26% disagree strongly, showing the strength of feeling about this statement. Apart from this first question, all this suggests that views on LAT in relationship to these topics are not particularly strong. The questions implicitly ask about living apart as compared to living together, and it seems that by and large most respondents did not see living apart as much different in terms of risk, emotional security or closeness. Some respondents, echoing what we discussed earlier about the flexibility and autonomy offered by LAT, saw relative advantages in living apart for practical autonomy.

Nearly all respondents, whatever the status and length of their relationship or the likelihood of moving together, saw LAT relationships in terms of monogamous, committed couples. Marriage remains a strong normative reference point, and around half the respondents saw themselves living together in the near future. This may be why most respondents, in all categories, perceived LAT as not that much different from cohabiting, and nor did most see LAT as posing extra risk to their relationship.

LAT as a caring relationship

How far do LAT partners provide care for one another? If, as we discussed earlier, most LATs see themselves as a committed couple, and moreover are in frequent contact, then does this coupledom include personal care in the same way as co-residential partners are assumed to provide for one another? All the 50 qualitative interviewees stated that they cared for their partner, and felt responsibility towards them in a general sense, and as we have seen the great majority declared themselves committed to both partner and the relationship. But when we come to actual provision of caring time and labour, the picture appears to be more variable.

Table 7. Living apart together: physical and emotional care, Britain 2011.

	Who would care for respondent if they were ill and had to stay in bed for some time %	Who would they turn to if they were very upset about a problem they were unable to sort out %
Partner	20	34
Family member	53	34
Friend/neighbour/ someone they live with	22	27
Other/Don't know	5	5

Source: National LAT survey 2011.

Table 7 provides an overview of survey respondents' expectations about personal care. Only 20% say their partner would look after them when ill in bed, while for upsetting and difficult problems 34% would turn to their partner. This is an important difference compared to the patterns found for married or cohabiting partners, according to a 2001 survey in Britain (Park & Roberts, 2002).[14] As many as 92% of married and cohabiting respondents in the 2001 survey would look after their partner when ill in bed. Similarly – although somewhat lower – almost two-thirds of married/ cohabiting people would turn to their partner if they felt 'a bit down or depressed'. In this respect LAT partners resemble single people in the 2001 survey more than married and cohabiting people, in that other family and friends (who sometimes live at the same address) tend to replace partners (who live elsewhere) for care. In the case of direct partner care, therefore, distance does make a difference and most LAT couples act differently from co-residential couples.

There were some variations in the provision of care by LAT category, however. 'Preference' respondents were more likely than those in other categories to say they would receive care from partners if ill in bed (27%), while 'constraint' LATs were more likely to turn to friends, neighbours or housemates (30%) – although for both categories family still predominated. 'Constraint' respondents were the most likely to discuss problems with their partner (40%) while the 'too early' category was particularly focussed on family (62% for care in bed, 38% for problems), although friends were also important for discussing problems. These variations would appear to reflect the nature and relative age of the different categories. There were also gender and class differences in interpersonal care: for 'illness in bed' men were more likely than women to say their partner would provide care (26% and 14%, respectively), while women were more likely to say 'family' (62% versus 44% of men).

At the same time LATs in managerial/professional occupations were more likely to say 'partner' (28% versus 17% of routine/manual workers and long-term unemployed), and those in routine/manual occupations and the long-term unemployed were more likely to say 'family' (61% versus 44% of managerial/professionals).

The 50 qualitative interviews looked at physical, practical, emotional and financial care between LAT partners in more detail (see Duncan, Carter, Phillips, Roseneil, & Stoilova, 2012). This confirmed the mixed picture found in the survey, where some LAT partners received high levels and intensities of care from partners. This could mean considerable expenditure of time and labour when infirm/ disabled partners were involved. However, many others received only modest amounts of care, and a few no practical care at all. Similar patterns emerged for childcare, where relevant. While some LAT partners acted 'just like a parent', others were only marginally involved with their partner's children. Overall, the evidence suggests that care from a partner – either personally or for children – is significant for some, but by no means all, people who live apart in Britain.

General discussion

Most LATs in Britain live close to their partners, and have frequent personal and telephone/electronic contact with them: they are largely not 'long distance' or 'part time' relationships. Overall the geographical constraints of LAT do not seem to impinge too much on most respondents' relationships, at least as far as spending time together and making practical arrangements are concerned. On the other hand, geographical distance is often appreciated for the flexibility and autonomy it enables within the relationship.

At the same time nearly all respondents saw their LAT relationships as those of monogamous, committed couples. For most, marriage remained a strong normative reference point, and around half of respondents saw themselves living together in the near future – although a substantial minority had lived apart for some time. Most respondents saw living apart as not that much different from cohabiting, nor did most see LAT as posing extra risk to their relationship.

However, LAT does appear to make difference to patterns of care. While for some LATs practical care between partners (and childcare if relevant) was a significant dimension of the relationship, for a majority this was not the case. Compared to co-residential couples, bedside care for illness or discussing problems was significantly less likely to be undertaken by the partner. Whether this simply reflects the practical problems of geographical distance, the large proportion of 'too early' relationships in LAT, or rather some emotional distance in LAT relationships, remains a question for further research.

In this paper we have been concerned with practices and perceptions of those in LAT relationships in Britain as a whole group – although given the diversity of motivations for living apart we have sometimes found it useful to disaggregate by reason for LAT. As mentioned earlier, there is little significant difference by either gender or class in the survey variables used here (although see Duncan, in press for gendered emotional meanings of LAT). There is, however, more significant co-variation by age. While we have referred to this as appropriate, we have not systematically controlled for age in the descriptive analysis pursued here. It remains an avenue for further research to assess how far variation in LAT practices and perceptions is related to age or reason for living apart. In this connection both the survey material and interview transcripts are freely available from the UK Data Archive.

Overall, we have found little evidence that LAT is, in general, a radical departure from the contemporary norm of coupledom – beyond the challenge that it poses to the expectation that couples cohabit – or that those in LAT relationships reject the 'gold standard' of marriage. On the other hand, the evidence also suggests that LAT does not just carry on conventional relationship forms under a different name; LAT is not simply or always a stage in courtship or marriage, or a straightforward reaction to constraints and circumstances; LAT allows flexibility for individuals in conducting their relationships. They can use the autonomy LAT offers to manage different needs and desires around personal autonomy, emotional closeness, other family commitments and how to respond to external circumstances. In this way LAT is both conventional and new.

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Notes

1. In the 2011 British Social Attitudes Survey, 9% of adults had a LAT partner; this rose to 22% of 'single' non-cohabiting adults and, excluding the widow(er)ed (who do not choose singledom), to 26%.
2. On two of the three surveys (BSA and NatCen Omnibus), we also checked the co-residential status of respondents who said they were married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership.
3. Weighting was applied all three constituent surveys both to correct for unequal selection probabilities and to calibrate to population estimates. This reduced the number of LAT

respondents to 518. Percentages in the tables refer to the weighted sample.

4. A small number of questions were simplified or omitted for the ONS survey (which was conducted last), where responses to the two previous surveys had shown little variation. The BSA survey had an additional question on 'the ideal relationship', asked of all respondents – not just LATs.
5. Sex of respondent and sex of LAT partner, and the respondent's age, ethnicity, marital status, housing tenure, highest educational qualification, region, disability, economic status, household composition.
6. The interview schedule first checked that the interviewee was still in a LAT relationship, and then covered household membership, the practicalities of the relationship, why the interviewee lived apart from their partner, the emotional nature of the relationship, previous relationships, future plans and expectations, whether the interviewee thought there were differences between LAT relationships and cohabiting relationships, 'who is important' and 'who is close' to the interviewee, and who is seen 'as family', who provides practical help, advice and emotional support and financial assistance to the interviewee and whom the interviewee provides care for, the interviewee's sense of their responsibilities to their partner, and the interviewee's attitudes to legal rights for LAT partners. See the UK Data Archive for full schedule.
7. Small base sizes (<100) mean the findings for these 'long distance' groups should be taken as indicative here and elsewhere.
8. All interview names are pseudonyms.
9. 'Do **you personally** think of yourselves as "a couple"?'
10. For the BSA survey this same question was asked of both LAT and non-LAT couples.
11. There was no direct question about commitment in the interviews; instead the issue was prompted more subtly although often this was not necessary, as interviewees themselves would raise the topic.
12. The remainder said no partner at all (9%), not in a relationship, but occasional partners (3%), or no ideal / none of these answers (4%).
13. Only 3% of the total LAT sample was married.
14. The questions asked in the 2001 and 2011 surveys, while similar, are not identical (the question text and answer options were different, and the questions were fielded on a different interview mode – self-completion in 2001, and face to face in 2011) so we can only use broad comparisons as an indication of similarity and difference.

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Appendix. The national survey sample and the interview sample: selected characteristics

	% Survey sample $n = 572$	% Interview sample $n = 50$
Preference	30	40
Too early	31	20
Constraint (financial)	19	26
Constraint (job/ study location, etc.)	12	14
Men	49	42
Women	51	58
Under 45	75	56
White	85	86
Heterosexual	97	98
Children in household	24	34
Living alone	33	44
Managerial and professional	29	10
Intermediate occupations	20	32
Routine and manual occupations, and unemployed	41	36

Source: National LAT survey 2011, 2011 interviews.